

Degrees of Permanence: Hawthorne, Emerson, and the Circle-Spiral in Social Reform

Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation
with research distinction in English in the undergraduate
colleges of The Ohio State University

by

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April 2015

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I. INTRODUCTION

In a letter sent to Horatio Bridge on February 4, 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne describes the previous evening, in which he read the end of *The Scarlet Letter* to his wife, Sophia Peabody. His account is as follows: “It broke her heart and sent her to bed with a grievous headache—which I look upon as a triumphant success!” (quoted in Leverenz 552). I would argue that Mrs. Hawthorne’s reaction to the end of the novel resembles that of many readers. The first time I read *The Scarlet Letter*, my response was not particularly positive: I was generally disappointed—not because the novel was poor, but because I felt that nothing happened. Hawthorne offers a promise of revolution by allowing Hester Prynne to contemplate social change and by setting the novel in the 17th century, separating Boston and the reader with several centuries of social development. Consequently, the reader expects that Hester will free herself from the constraints of Puritan law and lead the community in an evolution that, as readers, we know occurs in history. But she ultimately returns to Boston and, of her own free will, takes up the scarlet letter for the last time. The novel concludes not with Hester, but with the scarlet letter—the symbol that represents society’s punishment of her crime. Instead of offering reassurance—instead of fulfilling the promise of revolution—Hawthorne calls attention to the resistance that progress generates, leaving the reader wondering if and how an individual, community, or nation ultimately overcomes it.

Hawthorne establishes an expectation of social reform, but instead of fulfilling it, he explores its potential for failure or success—and he does so through the figure of the circle. Ralph Waldo Emerson grapples with similar issues of social change in his essay, “Circles”—namely prison reforms and the rigidity of the Unitarian church—and like Hawthorne, he does so

via circular imagery.¹ Writing during the mid-1800s, both men were on the cusp of the transition to modernity, which is a critical threshold for the figure of the circle, an aesthetic touchstone that was circulating and changing throughout the 19th century. Until the scientific revolution, this shape represented balance and unity, and in a time when God, human, and world were believed to be one, it served to represent and explore religion and cosmography. However, during the 1800s, the circle was metamorphosing into a spiral, a figure that fully emerged in the works of early 20th-century authors such as W. B. Yeats and James Joyce. The transition from circle to spiral also marks the passage into a more secular age, which results in artists using the figure to address more secular issues. Hawthorne and Emerson, preceding the modern era, occupied a liminal space between the harmonious circle and the unruly, ever-expanding spiral. Moreover, their writing marks a shift in how the circle was used in literature: from thinking about God and astrology to addressing social issues like politics and reform. Both authors seem fascinated by circular imagery, but they tend to use it much like Yeats uses the spiral: to convey motion and unrest—which is fitting for an age in which God, human, and world were no longer a unified whole. While neither Emerson nor Hawthorne directly invokes the spiral, their intermediate position in literature—on the brink of the circle’s transformation into a spiral and the shift into a more secular modernity—explains the combination of these two shapes in their writing.

For Hawthorne and Emerson, the circle-spiral is a vehicle for exploring social change, a process imbued with the tension between advancement and stagnation. Both men grappled with the issue of social reform—and the coexistence of progress and resistance in particular—for personal and historical reasons. In “The Custom-House,” Hawthorne establishes this tension in

¹ For an in-depth discussion of Emerson’s engagement with prison reforms of the 1830s, see Caleb Smith’s “Emerson and Incarceration.”

his attitude towards his native town: he knows (at least retrospectively) that he ought to leave Salem in order to flourish as a writer, but he repeatedly returns out of a connection established by his long family history. This ambivalence extends to his opinion of the politics of the Custom-House and the United States as a nation, which have become stagnant and unsustainable in his eyes. Emerson experienced a similar conflict in his dealings with the Unitarian church: once a radical group, the Unitarians rebuked Emerson for challenging traditional theology in a lecture he gave at Harvard's Divinity School. As writers, Hawthorne and Emerson also embodied the tension between maintaining stability and making progress. As critical as they were of social stasis, both men were celebrated for firmly establishing an "American" literature, and their works are still an integral part of the literary canon. In other words, they *were* the center of an institutionalized literary culture. These authors were not simply writing about the tension between social oppression and the desire for reform; they bore this weight themselves as they used their position—their authorship—to explore a movement away from institutionalized centers that they viewed as personally and nationally oppressive. Thus, Hawthorne and Emerson personally experienced the paradoxical coexistence of stasis and progress in their dealings with society: they were frustrated by the social stagnation they confronted, which cultivated a desire for change, but in order to explore the possibility of reform, they used their centrally located position in a firmly established literary tradition.

Additionally, both Emerson and Hawthorne faced the historical realities of colonialism and prison reform: the United States of the 1840s and 50s was a growing empire that struggled to maintain its stability, attempting to do so through institutionalized methods such as mass incarceration and the regulation of slavery and indigenous populations. As Laura Doyle

summarizes, “the nation was embroiled in conflict over a range of issues—the Indian Removal Acts, the annexation of western territories and war with Mexico, the Fugitive Slave Law, the 1848 Women’s Convention in Seneca Falls, and the specter (as many felt it) of the European revolutions of 1848” (252). Since Emerson wrote in the late 1830s and Hawthorne in the late 1840s, each author engaged with these historical realities in different ways and to different extents: Emerson was thinking about specific types of prison reforms while Hawthorne contemplates discipline in a more general sense; Emerson considers change abstractly while Hawthorne directly addresses issues of colonialism by juxtaposing the 19th-century United States with 17th-century Boston; and Hawthorne dramatizes the tensions between stasis and change evident in the United States while Emerson discusses them philosophically. Despite these differences, both men draw from the tensions of stasis and change in their historical moment and the larger framework of the United States, grappling with these issues through the trope of the circle (and the implicit spiral). The result is each author’s invocation of the circle, a figure of stability and unity, and his subsequent shift into a spiral-like motion, which both originates and departs from the circle’s center.

To understand *The Scarlet Letter*’s fundamental ambivalence surrounding social change, as explored through the circle, we must look to Emerson’s own engagement with the trope. Unlike Hawthorne, Emerson speaks in abstractions, obliquely addressing issues of his own time—namely prison reform and his conflict with the Unitarian church—which invites the reader to fill in the historical gaps with his or her own imagination. However, much like Hawthorne, Emerson’s main focus is social control, specifically a process of reform in which individuals, religious sects, and nations cross social boundaries only to institutionalize their own beliefs and

principles. Hoping that shifts in the social order open up the possibility for further change, Emerson confronts the reality that reform is not a floodgate, but—paradoxically—a mode of solidifying the new practices and ideals. Thus, “Circles” expresses its own sort of ambivalence towards the prospect of change, and because it does so through the trope of the circle, Emerson’s essay informs Hawthorne’s own treatment of social reform—which, in *The Scarlet Letter*, is a revolution in gender dynamics.

The issue of gender adds another layer of complexity to Hawthorne’s exploration of social change and the tensions between a transgressive individual and a resistant society. Hester’s femininity is critical to gender reform not only because she is a member of the oppressed group, but because she stands outside of the male-dominated, institutionalized center. However, Hawthorne’s treatment of gender throughout the preface and novel is complex, ambiguous, and at times confusing. He makes a bold choice in establishing his forward-thinking protagonist as a woman, but to say the novel promotes feminism is reductive—and at certain moments in the text, apparently incorrect. Hawthorne simultaneously constructs and limits the threat women pose to society as agents of change: Hester does make progress towards gender equality by informing the Puritans of her “new truth,” but she does not pose a threat to the colony’s practices and beliefs, and she ultimately does not reform the existing gender dynamic. Thus, Hawthorne presents progress in a way that is non-violent and non-threatening, which makes it palatable but also inherently disappointing—after all, change *does* threaten the status quo, so the acceptability of Hester’s progress does not indicate much of an investment in an actual social upheaval.

Given the utopian potential of revolution, Hester’s contribution to gender equality is fundamentally unsatisfying because it upholds much of the ossified culture that initially confines

her. In “The Custom-House,” Hawthorne clearly explains that the following novel is a romance, and in doing so he prepares the reader to anticipate some sort of balance from the ending—while there may be loss, there should also be an equal gain. However, Sophia’s reaction clearly demonstrates some sort of remaining imbalance. Hester finally escapes society’s grasp and re-establishes herself not in the center of the colony’s “circle,” but on the periphery. If this were the end of the novel, then it could be considered a successful romance; however, the final paragraph halts the change Hester initiated. Not only does Hawthorne relate Hester’s death, but he describes her tombstone, which stands for both herself and Dimmesdale and bears a description of the scarlet letter—the symbol that initially confines Hester within society’s bounds—instead of her name or ancestral coat of arms. The ending is somewhat redeemed by the fact that the scarlet letter enables her to contemplate gender reform and initiate this process, but this progress is drastically overshadowed by the curtailment that immediately follows. The disappointment many readers experience at this point—including the severity of Sophia’s reaction—is not simply a response to the last paragraph, but to the fact that Hester’s progress is cut short by two full stops: her death and the end of the book.

While Hawthorne and Emerson use circular imagery to grapple with similar issues of social reform, they ultimately end up in different places: Emerson emphasizes the inevitability of change while Hawthorne emphasizes the resistance that change incurs. Whereas Emerson assures the reader that humanity ultimately overcomes stagnation, Hawthorne opens and closes *The Scarlet Letter* with society’s two forms of containment: the prison and the cemetery. Instead of reassuring the reader that Hester will overcome the colony’s resistance, he creates doubt. The possibility of failure and hopelessness raised by the novel’s ending fosters the disappointment,

frustration, and heartbreak that many readers experience; however, the fact that these feelings coexist with (fleeting) optimism is critical. In Hester's brief redemption, Hawthorne demonstrates that what may seem like the successful immobilization of a progressive individual is paradoxically a step toward future change, that what is resisted can function as a vehicle for social reform. Additionally, the fact that Hester's progressiveness lies in her return asks the reader to explore what exactly social change looks like: perhaps it is not the elaborate revolution of physically escaping or opposing the status quo, but the mental workings of a seemingly passive individual. Hawthorne raises all of these possibilities without allowing them to develop. Unlike Emerson, he does not provide an answer as to whether Hester is successful, whether progressive individuals can combat a resistant society, or what reform looks like after it is initiated—he simply asks.

II. “CIRCLES,” BROKEN CIRCLES, AND SPIRALS

The circle itself has a long history, and its meaning has transformed throughout time. In her formative work, *The Breaking of the Circle*, Marjorie Hope Nicholson traces the development of the circle through the major periods of Western thought—classical, post-Renaissance, and modern—claiming that the Enlightenment theorization of the world as a mechanism broke what was considered, up through the Renaissance, as the Circle of Perfection: the conception of a circle as a perfect, unified, finite whole that brought together human, world, and God as one. The circle finally returned to literature in the 19th century, but it has never again been the Circle of Perfection despite artists’ efforts to replicate the image.

The most elemental difference between pre-Enlightenment circles and their modern counterparts is that in the former time, these figures were metaphorical truths “inscribed upon man, world, and universe in which design, plan, and repetition of motif were everywhere apparent” (Nicholson 5). Earlier thinkers used the circle as an analogy but were unaware of doing so; the figure shaped their thinking subconsciously because it constituted the pattern of their world. Since the 19th century, the circle has returned as a fundamentally different entity. As Nicholson puts it, “one of the most important differences between our modern attitude and the attitude of the Platonically-minded thinkers, from the ancients through the Renaissance, lies in our self-consciousness: we know that we are making analogies” (126). In other words, “Metaphor, based on accepted truth, inscribed by God in the nature of the universe, has given way to simile” (Nicholson 7). Whereas circular patterns helped form the consciousness and imagination of our ancestors, human consciousness now creates and uses circles with full awareness of doing so.

Additionally, Enlightenment thought drastically altered humanity's conception of the world, which fractured the Circle of Perfection and left artists searching for a new mode of representation. The theorization of a mechanistic earth (advanced by thinkers of the "New Philosophy," such as Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, and Newton) certainly disrupted the notion of a closed, finite circle that rendered human, world, and God as one living entity; however, "The Idea of Infinity" is what finally "demolished the Circle of Perfection" (Nicholson 125, 165). The astronomical discoveries of the 17th century—namely that like our sun, stars are the centers of other universes, and infinitely so—had the most severe effect on the conception of a finite, perfect, circular universe. As a result, man's confrontation with infinity "released him from the limits of a finite world and universe, gave mind and spirit space to expand," and led him to discover "the aesthetics of the infinite" (Nicholson 202). Here Nicholson concludes her examination of the circle, with the "Poets, scientists, philosophers of a newer 'new philosophy'—these were the first Romantics" (204). And I will pick up with one of those Romantics: Emerson.

Because Emerson was writing in the mid-1800s, two centuries after the Circle of Perfection was broken, one might ask why he wrote an essay about circles. Nicholson claims that "During the nineteenth century, when the circle returned to literature, it tended, under the influence of the evolutionary theory and belief in progress, to be not the Circle of Perfection but a spiral" (8). Additionally, in his detailed examination of spirals in 20th-century art and literature, Nico Israel states, "special consideration must be given to the nineteenth [century], as perhaps nowhere did the notion of the spiral as an expression of nature, or 'life,' receive more attention than in Romanticism and its aftermaths" (31). W. B. Yeats, to whom Israel devotes much of his

attention, employs the spiral vividly: take the “widening gyre” of “The Second Coming,” in which “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold”—quite the opposite of a unified, finite circle (*l.* 1, 3). There is no “widening gyre” in “Circles,” or at least not explicitly; however, Emerson’s circles are very spiral-like, recalling the constantly moving and expanding image Yeats invokes. Emerson’s blatant and repeated invocation of the circle does seem to be one example of the many thinkers who, “For three hundred years . . . have vainly tried to put together the pieces of a broken circle” (Nicholson 123). In other words, unlike his pre-Enlightenment counterparts, Emerson knew he was using an analogy. However, the spiral, which Yeats consciously invokes, implicitly surfaces in “Circles.”² Just as circular imagery shaped the imaginations of our ancestors, the spiral seems to mentally structure Emerson’s thought (even while he knowingly employs the circle).³ He does not explicitly utilize the spiral—he never uses the word “spiral” or anything synonymous—but this twirling, expanding figure suffuses his consciously employed analogy of the circle. The resulting combination of circle and spiral—one stable and finite, the other ever-moving and ever-growing—serves as an ideal tool for Emerson to process the issues of reform and resistance, change and stasis, that he faced in the decade preceding “Circles.”

² As Israel points out, some of Emerson’s contemporaries *did* deliberately employ the spiral, most notably Goethe, Hegel, and Marx (31-3). The attention paid to this figure may have contributed to its silent presence in “Circles.” Even though Emerson focuses on circular imagery, the social circulation of spiral-focused thought may have impacted his study of circles.

³ I would like to distinguish the spiral to which Nicholson and I refer from the “spire” or “ascending spiral” Emerson often invokes. Take, for example, the epigraph to *Nature*, in which Emerson writes, “And, striving to be man, the worm / Mounts through all the spires of form” (*l.* 5-6). As biographer James R. Guthrie argues, “That the ‘worm’ is somehow related to man is implicit within the symbol of Emerson’s ascending spiral” (189). The epigraph illustrates Emerson’s concept of “*metamorphosis* [which] does not just connote change, but rather progressive change, of the sort represented by Emerson’s ascending spiral” (Guthrie 189). While the ascending spiral—a conical shape that narrows as it rises—may represent biological change, the spirals implicit in “Circles” resemble Yeats’s “widening gyre,” growing larger as it turns. It is this shape that permeates Emerson’s discussion of *social* change in “Circles,” which we will discuss shortly.

Composed in 1840 and published in March of 1841, “Circles” is believed to be one of Emerson’s responses to the societal backlash incited by his Divinity School *Address* of 1838, in which he censured the church and challenged traditional Unitarian theology. Publicly condemned as “a great offense” against Christianity, Emerson came face to face with the rigidity of a once radical Unitarian establishment (quoted in Smith 220). As Caleb Smith puts it, “The Unitarians, once insurgents, had grasped a measure of institutional authority and turned it against Emerson, shaming him for his own radicalism” (220). The institutional ossification of Unitarian thought prompted Emerson to reflect on patterns of reform, which led him to an understanding of humanity’s “chief evil” as “the universal human preference for the familiar, the customary, the traditional” (Packer 132). In order to account for this evil, Emerson created what B. L. Packer calls “a new myth of the Fall,” in which humanity’s ruin results from a lack of movement, or a “failure of outflowing energy” (132). First introduced in his 1839 lecture, “The Protest,” Emerson’s conception of this new Fall—and the contradictory nature of an ever-changing yet ossified reform—is most fully expressed in “Circles.” He explores this tension via the circle-spiral, which is an apt device given that his conflict is both sacred and profane in nature: he initially takes issue with the Unitarian church but sees it as a larger issue in the secular politics of social reform—and he casts this process as a reinterpretation of the Fall. Thus, the essay depicts a shift into a more secular conception of change, a process that implicates both permanence and flux—elements of the circle and spiral, respectively—in social progress.

To better understand the coexistence of fixity and mutation in social change, let us first explore the similarly paradoxical principles of the universe, as Emerson proposes in “Circles.” Initially, he claims that “There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile”

(Emerson 212). Emerson enjoins the reader to understand the universe as constantly changing because of an inherent condition (a lack of “fixtures”). However, the reader is immediately asked to reconcile this principle with another opening claim: “We are all our lifetime reading the copious sense of this first of forms [i.e. the circle]” (Emerson 212). While there are supposedly no fixtures in the world, we are constantly reading and re-reading the same image. Although there are “copious” senses of the circle, and although each reading may be different or more advanced than the last, all senses and readings derive from the “first of forms,” the circle. Even a “fluid” and “volatile” universe is grounded by this fundamental shape. The remainder of the essay perpetuates this initial coexistence of fixture and fluidity, a paradox which scholars—most notably David M. Wyatt, in addition to Leonard N. Neufeldt and Christopher Barr—all confront, despite their varying lines of argument.

While the tensions between stability and flux in social change have not yet been the focus of a critical discussion of “Circles,” scholars like Wyatt, Neufeldt, and Barr find themselves working through this paradox in the process of their argumentation. Neufeldt and Barr—who investigate whether “Circles” illustrates deconstructionism or the adherence to a transcendental signifier—frame the fixity-flux paradox in theoretical terms: deconstructionism entails that “the play of *différance* instantaneously erases the shape of the text” while a transcendental signifier indicates a mooring to some metaphysical principle, meaning that “there is an ontologically stable text that can be authoritatively read” (106). In Neufeldt and Barr’s essay, the vehicle for the motion-rest paradox is the speaker, who they identify as a “Latin Father” who provides “a series of dialectical propositions,” resulting in “the speaker’s simultaneous acceptance and denial of both arguments [i.e. the deconstructionist and the transcendental signifier]” (105-6). In this

way, they argue, “Circles” accommodates both deconstructionism, or the notion of an ever-fleeting text, and the transcendental signifier, or a stable text.

Wyatt, on the other hand, focuses his discussion of “Circles” on the element of time as it is perceived through the reading experience. Like Neufeldt and Barr, he too confronts a simultaneous flowing and arrest. Rather than identifying the speaker as the engine of this paradox, Wyatt claims that the form of the essay—its punctuation, repetition of phrases, progression of sentences, etc.—conveys a combination of motion and stillness to the reader. In other words, “We are processed by a structure aspiring at once to closure and continuity,” which results in “a reading experience both continuous and arrested” (Wyatt 143, 145). He also describes this paradox as a “spiraling and staying,” which anticipates my own exploration of the essay’s shift from a stable, closed circle to an unstable, expanding spiral. However, he does not delve into the historical context of Emerson’s essay or the history of the circle as a literary form in order to understand why circles and spirals appear together. Moreover, while critics like Wyatt—as well as Neufeldt and Barr—confront the same contradiction of fixity and flux that I explore, they see it pertaining to different topics: for Neufeldt and Barr, literary theory, and for Wyatt, the perception of time. On the other hand, I examine stasis and movement within one of Emerson’s main topics: the process of social change throughout history.

Before delving into social reform, which he explores via the circle-spiral, Emerson establishes a general, universal tension between motion and stillness. In the most fundamental sense, Emerson’s change is a geometrical circumscription: “Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every other circle another can be drawn” (212). So far, the visual representation of accumulated changes—which, over the course of time, is history—is a set of concentric

circles. However, the diagram is a bit more complicated because change also makes “the verge of to-day the new center” (Emerson 222). The manifold waves of change no longer appear as concentric circles, for they do not share the same center; the center is always moving outwards to a new periphery, resembling a spiral. In the words of Wyatt, “As its every circle devolves into a spiral, its every center permanently shifts” (150). The spiral-like movement of the center further and further outward resembles the “Turning and turning” of Yeats’s “widening gyre,” yet Emerson’s spiraling process of change is comprised of circles (*l.* 1). Therefore, while the initial circle remains stationary (other rings are drawn around it, but it does not move), the center constantly shifts outward with each circumscription—as Yeats would say, “the center cannot hold.”

A similar paradox of stability and movement manifests in Emerson’s explanation of *how* change happens. His preliminary description of this process is as follows: “The new continents are built out of the ruins of an old planet; the new races fed out of the decomposition of the forgoing. New arts destroy the old” (Emerson 213). Even within this brief passage exists the contradiction of a stable yet moving center. On the one hand, Emerson claims that “New arts destroy the old,” which supports the idea of a constantly changing focus: once new arts are created, a new center forms and demolishes the old. However, Emerson’s own passage reads against the destruction of the old focal point, for “the ruins of an old planet” construct “new continents” and the “decomposition” of old races feeds the new population.⁴ The former center is

⁴ Wyatt’s reading of the stillness and motion in the essay’s structure is particularly intriguing when thinking about this passage (though he doesn’t discuss it himself). He claims that “The frequent restatement of the essay itself argues for the difficulty of advancing a vision wholly new,” and while I agree that the essay’s form communicates the impossibility of an entirely new creation, I don’t think Emerson’s circles are made “wholly new” (147). Instead, they are regenerated out of old circles, which the restatement of old sentences nicely illustrates: Emerson’s new sentence is not an exact replication of the former, but a regenerated version that has been transformed by both the variation in diction and the text that has been read since the first sentence.

never completely destroyed, but is rather transformed into the new: “The new position of the advancing man has all the powers of the old, yet has them all new” (Emerson 226).⁵ Neufeldt and Barr overlook this point, claiming that the material with which one builds the future “must eventually be destroyed so that the world can be regenerated” (99). However, if the materials are destroyed, there would be nothing to regenerate. They reconcile this problem by adding that once history is destroyed, the future is built out of its “fragments,” implying that history has mostly been eradicated except for certain key parts.⁶ Instead, I would argue that new circles are not made of fragments, but regenerate the material of an old circle in its entirety. Though it may not appear the same, this material is reinvented into a new circle and therefore continues to exist. Thus, while the center of the universe’s circles is constantly moving and transforming, it remains essentially the same; like a spiral, every new center fundamentally derives from the original point (though at various removes from this source).

Even during the process of reform, the inevitable force of transformation strains against humankind’s propensity to inhibit change, which Emerson not only experienced on a personal level with the Unitarian church, but on a national level as well. As Emerson writes, “it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance, as for instance

⁵ Nicholson nearly repeats Emerson when she writes, “The complete shattering of the circle was the result of an old idea that came back with new meaning and apparent proof: *the idea of the infinity of the universe and an infinity of worlds*” (157-8). Ironically, the way she describes the “shattering of the circle” is how Emerson describes the creation of new circles. It is tempting to think about Nicholson’s text—her trajectory of the circle—as tracing a set of circles in itself. In other words, that what she calls a “breaking of the circle” is in fact the creation of a new ring. After all, the breaking of the circle was “the breaking up of order in the world scheme,” which sounds much like Emerson’s circumscription in which “All that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles” (Nicholson 107, Emerson 219). However, we must bear in mind that Emerson’s circles do not replicate the Circle of Perfection, but are spiral-like. Thus, the breaking of the circle—even if it were actually a new orb—would not represent the Circle of Perfection, but one circle in a spiraling series.

⁶ Emerson does write that “here and there a solitary figure or fragment [of history] remain[s],” which probably led Neufeldt and Barr to this conclusion (213). However, the surrounding text suggests that these fragments only exist because the majority of the materials have been *transformed*, not destroyed.

an empire, rules of an art, local usage, a religious rite, to heap itself on that ridge and to solidify and hem in the life” (214). The first “inert” entity Emerson lists is “an empire,” which is critical for both conceptual and historical reasons. First, an empire is a metropolitan center that connects outward to surrounding colonies. However, empires consolidate all that is gained from these colonies at the center; the purpose of expansion is not to create a new center, but to strengthen the existing one. Therefore, while an empire’s goal is to grow, it simultaneously tries to “solidify and hem in” the newly acquired spaces in order to maintain the existing core. This was also a historical reality for Emerson (and Hawthorne, as we will shortly discuss): by the mid-1800s, the United States had grown from a colony into an empire and was experiencing an intense moment of national expansion. The country was no longer an outgrowth of the English empire, serving the Old World center, but had become a center in itself. However, as the U.S. expanded, it fought to maintain this centrality. These conflicts ranged from the Indian Removal Act of 1830 to the Mexican War of the mid-1840s, to the building tensions around slavery, which heightened with every new land acquisition (and would soon erupt in the Civil War). Thus, the United States was expanding across North America while simultaneously attempting to maintain a sense of stability, or unity, as a nation. In addition to empire, Emerson lists “local usage,” or social customs, and religion as “inert” entities, which are essential components of a community, nation, or empire—and a point to bear in mind as we move into the Puritan community of *The Scarlet Letter*, which would eventually develop into the U.S. empire of Emerson’s time.

Amidst the expansion of the U.S. empire, the country was also experiencing the birth of mass incarceration. In fact, Caleb Smith argues that the titular shape of “Circles” is not an abstract symbol, but a literal representation of the prisons Emerson was visiting and pondering at

the time. Emerson, an advocate of solitude as a means for self-development, was heavily influenced by the prison reforms of the 1830s, which utilized the Auburn system's "solitary cell" and Jeremy Bentham's panopticon—as Smith puts it, "The very architecture of captivity formed Emerson's image of liberation" (225). However, prompted by the backlash against his 1838 Divinity School *Address*, Emerson began to consider the social causes of crime, and—while agreeing with solitary discipline—he became critical of the prisons themselves, viewing "criminal law and its courts and jails [as] instruments of class warfare" (Smith 219). Thus, Smith argues that "Circles" is "part of a long discursive struggle over the meaning of solitary confinement and its relation to the rest of society" (226). Moreover, the essay explores what it means to be part of an expanding nation that increasingly confines its public in prisons—and how one goes about reforming such a society. It asks whether America has ossified as a culture, if it resists new ideas, and if it is time for a new center—and based on Emerson's dissatisfaction with prison reforms and the Unitarians, the text answers "yes" on all fronts.

While Emerson's historical moment was shaped by colonialism and incarceration—physical forms of expansion and containment—his conception of history and historical change in "Circles" revolves around mental activity. Emerson writes that "The great moments of history are the facilities of performance through the strength of ideas, as the works of genius and religion" (227). In a world inclined to resist change, *ideas* make great historical moments; even if the moment is one of physical "performance," it is a "performance" of and through ideas. Therefore, revolutions of thought are equally, if not more, important than physical revolutions—a rather pointed message to those who opposed Emerson's Divinity School *Address*, in which he disclosed his *ideas* about religion. Additionally, Emerson claims that "history and the state of the

world at any one time [are] directly dependent on the intellectual classification than [sic] existing in the minds of men” (218). History is not only made of moments in which ideas are performed and then cease to be performed—which suggests a sort of permanence once the historical moment has passed—but is instead an unstable, ever-changing entity that is subject to the fluctuations of humanity’s “mental horizon,” which may “instantly revolutionize” the status quo at any time (Emerson 219). In “Circles,” history is both a collection of moments no longer being played out (that is, remaining static) and a constant regeneration of those moments by the minds of the present day. Like Emerson’s repetition of similar phrases and sentences—which Wyatt calls the return of the essay—this contradiction of a fixed yet fluid history has a dual effect: it can “create a sense of timelessness . . . Or it can create a sense of connection with and dependence upon the past, a sense of historical awareness” (148). Just as old sentences develop a new or more nuanced meaning every time they reappear in the essay—while still deriving from their prior points in the text—history is at once “timeless,” or constructed in the present, and reliant on the past, as humans mentally construct history out of stable, complete moments. Like a spiral, history both derives from a past point of origin and moves outward in its present-day regeneration. And at both points in history—past “performances” of “ideas” and the present re-creation of those performances—Emerson attributes history and historical change mainly to the mind.

Two key principles emerge from my examination of the circle-spiral throughout Emerson’s discussion of social change: (1) reform entails, in various ways, both movement and arrest—as represented by the coexistence of the finite, stable circle and infinite, moving spiral—and (2) the progress that occurs in—and is later viewed as—history is largely driven by the mind.

Although Emerson consciously employs the circle as a literary device, it is the spiral that underlies his thinking process, structuring the consciousness that invokes circular imagery. The resulting circle-spiral marks his position on the cusp of a more modern, secular age, as is evident in the issue of social change that he explores via this shape. Additionally, the combination of circle and spiral exists alongside Emerson's historical moment, a time of empire, colonization, and revolution—of the desire to change in order to strengthen what exists.

For these reasons, "Circles" can help us understand Hawthorne's texts: Hawthorne also inhabited this historical moment, and he deliberately uses the circle to grapple with issues of change and stasis, as they relate to both society and individual. Like Emerson, the spiral is latent in Hawthorne's use of the circle, perceptible only through a close investigation of the trope. Or as Nicholson would say, both men know they are making analogies when they use the circle, whereas the spiral subliminally guides their thought. Emerson and Hawthorne are two examples of the same phenomenon: authors who attempt to re-create the circle but unwittingly reveal an underlying, more modern engagement with the figure of a spiral. Moreover, their texts illuminate a particular moment in the evolution of the circle as a literary form: the transition from religious to secular discussions and the attending shift into a spiral. Thus, "Circles" and *The Scarlet Letter* (including "The Custom-House") demonstrate similar processes of social change in which circle-spiral imagery highlights the inherent tension between motion and stagnation.

However, there *are* fundamental differences between the authors and their texts. They are often paired together as authors of "American Renaissance,"⁷ but Hawthorne biographer Frank Preston Stearns claims that "No two personalities could be more unlike than Hawthorne and

⁷ A term coined by F. O. Matthiesen in his book, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941).

Emerson” (165). Fellow biographer James M. Cox adds that it is “a contrast amounting almost to conflict. It is everywhere present—biographically, philosophically, artistically” (88). The two men were neighbors while Hawthorne resided at the Old Manse (1842 to 1845), a home which he and Sophia rented from Emerson. They were also in regular contact with one another, as each man appears in the other’s private journals. However, while Emerson “seems to have had the highest respect for Hawthorne the man,” he criticized much of his work (Cox 60). This is most explicitly stated in a journal entry Emerson wrote in 1842: “Nathaniel Hawthorne's reputation as a writer is a very pleasing fact, because his writing is not good for anything, and this is a tribute to the man” (quoted in Nelson 150). Thus, while the authors were familiar with one another, they were likely not intending to emulate each other’s writing.

The differences between Emerson’s and Hawthorne’s texts also derive from their respective forms—the essay and the novel—which influence how each author represents the tensions of social reform and stagnation, particularly as they play out in the relationship between individual and society. While Emerson does explore the interplay between the individual and social realms—for example, discussing the effects of a “thinker” on social institutions—his essay mainly operates through philosophical abstractions that do not clearly illustrate the relationship between individual and society. As Hawthorne himself states in a journal entry, Emerson is “a great searcher for facts; but they seem to melt away and become unsubstantial in his grasp” (quoted in Mellow 208). Take for example the aforementioned quotation stating that “history and the state of the world” depend on “the minds of men”: Emerson suggests that a collective human mentality shapes history, but this collective is made up of individual “minds.” He does not illustrate the reciprocity between each mind and the collective, but relies on abstract

notions such as “the state of the world” and “intellectual classification” to describe the co-creation (between each individual and the human collective) of a particular view of human events (i.e. history). Thus, Emerson seems like a distanced philosopher partially because the essay itself (that is, the form) does not illustrate the relationship between self and community.

On the other hand, the novel is an inherently communal form. M. M. Bakhtin, in “Discourse in the Novel,” defines the novel as “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (262). Emerson’s essay also represents a diversity of voices, but whereas he philosophizes, Hawthorne dramatizes. Because *The Scarlet Letter* is a novel, it inherently represents the interconnectedness of individual and society: as an individual author, Hawthorne is responsible for “artistically organiz[ing]” the “diversity” of social and individual voices. Not only does the act of writing a novel explore the relationship between individual and society, of artist and community, but Hawthorne’s content is heavily concerned with this link as well. His novel and preface deal with two distinct communities—Salem in the 19th-century United States and Boston as a 17th-century colony—and how a particular individual (himself and Hester, respectively) impacts and is impacted by each society. However, the differences between Emerson and Hawthorne do not mean that their texts should not or cannot be put into dialogue with one another. In fact, doing so allows “Circles” to inform *The Scarlet Letter* and its preface since both authors grapple with issues of social change via the circle yet describe this figure in a spiral-like way. The resulting combination of circle and spiral serves as a vehicle for each author to explore the tensions between permanence and progress in reform, which results in fundamentally similar patterns of social change in both authors’ texts.

Because Emerson's essay—written about a decade before *The Scarlet Letter*—anticipates Hawthorne's use of the trope in his negotiation of social stasis and change, "Circles" informs the way we read circular imagery in the novel and preface. The similarities between the authors' engagement with the circle not only inform each other's exploration of reform, but they demonstrate how authors were generally thinking about and representing social issues in the mid-1800s. And just as important as the texts' similarities are the differences between how each author uses the trope of the circle. Hawthorne was writing a decade closer to the Civil War, in a moment of more intense national polarization, and this is evident in the less optimistic, or reassuring, end point he reaches in *The Scarlet Letter*. Therefore, juxtaposing Hawthorne's works with an earlier writer like Emerson, who expresses more confidence about the prospect of change, establishes a point of contrast that more precisely defines his treatment of and conclusions about social change.

III. CIRCLE-SPIRALS IN “THE CUSTOM-HOUSE”

Hawthorne employs the trope of the circle more frequently in *The Scarlet Letter* than in “The Custom-House,” and the novel more directly grapples with the larger issues of individual and society as well as isolation and interdependence. However, the prefatory essay frames the novel in a way that emphasizes historical change and the tensions of movement and stagnation—or what Emerson would call the ossification of reform—inherent in the process of social evolution. The central purpose of “The Custom-House,” according to Hawthorne, is to detail the origin of the story related in *The Scarlet Letter* and to prove its authenticity (8). Like most prefaces, Hawthorne’s introduces his novel and explains his inspiration for writing it; however, this is not the extent of its effect. He raises issues in the preface—namely social stagnation and the decay of the U.S. empire—that he uses the novel to explore. As Dan McCall puts it, “only in *The Scarlet Letter* itself was Hawthorne able to make a form adequate to the magnitude of the problems raised in ‘The Custom-House’” (357-8). And because he uses circular imagery to grapple with these issues in both the novel and preface, analyzing this shape in “The Custom-House” prepares the reader to understand the novel’s circles in a similar way.

Furthermore, the 200-year gap between the setting of *The Scarlet Letter* and Hawthorne’s own time, in which he writes “The Custom-House,” sets these two places and times at different points along the historical continuum. The reader (especially today) has a retrospective view of the state of the U.S. across several centuries and can view the issues and conflicts of each time period as phases in the larger arc of national history, ultimately leading up to his or her present moment. In “Circles” Emerson writes that “The field cannot be well seen within the field,” and just as Hawthorne stands beyond the field of 17th-century Boston, so the reader stands outside of

the entire field of the novel and, therefore, is best able to view it (220). From this point, the reader can also fast-forward to the 19th century to see what effects Hester's story bears on 19th-century America. Because the reader already knows that most of what he or she is reading *has* changed, the focus falls on the specifics of that process: what the relations between a radical individual and resistant society look like, how one furthers social change in this relationship, how larger patterns of stagnation and progress play into it, and what exactly Hester contributes to the process of gender reform.

In order to understand how circular imagery informs issues like social change and the relationship between individual and society, we must first turn to the circles themselves and investigate how Hawthorne uses them. At times in the preface, Hawthorne invokes—or attempts to invoke—a circle like Nicholson's Circle of Perfection. Before beginning the narrative of his Custom-House experience, Hawthorne briefly introduces the preface and explains his motivation for writing and including it. In detailing how he will address the reader, Hawthorne criticizes authors who write so revealingly that it seems as if they are addressing “the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy; as if the printed book . . . were to find out the divided segment of the writer's own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with it” (7). In light of Nicholson's *The Breaking of the Circle*, this passage seems a nostalgic yearning for the Circle of Perfection, as if the novel were a means for repairing it: a “segment” of the author's “nature” is “divided,” and his existence is therefore incomplete; however, “the printed book” can seek this missing portion, reunite it with the author, and “complete his circle of existence.” The Circle of Perfection, long ago broken, may once again be made finite, complete, and perfect—and this is precisely what Nicholson says authors have been attempting

to do since the 17th century. This mode of authorship is indeed appealing, as indicated by Hawthorne's ironically idealistic tone. However, he seems to know this fantasy is unrealistic (or at least inappropriate) since he criticizes authors who believe writing will "complete" their "circle." Instead, Hawthorne indulges in this idea only so much that he can overcome his "native reserve," imagining that he speaks to a friend rather than "the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy" (7). Thus, he seems aware that—at least as a model for authorship—the circle as a finite, complete, unified concept is appealing but ultimately unattainable.

As if relinquishing the fantasy of the Circle of Perfection and gravitating toward the moving, expanding spiral, Hawthorne more than once moralizes on the benefit of moving beyond a circle's periphery. In the middle of an anecdote about how the Custom-House officers have not read his writing, Hawthorne claims that "It is a good lesson—though it may often be a hard one—for a man who has dreamed of literary fame . . . to step aside out of the narrow circle in which his claims are recognized, and to find how utterly devoid of significance, beyond that circle, is all that he achieves, and all he aims at" (27). While Hawthorne may be using the word "circle" simply to reference a social group, it is a loaded term in light of Emerson's essay. Like "Circles," this passage shows the invocation of a stable shape and the movement beyond it. Hawthorne's "narrow circle" is a firmly established social space that gives meaning to "all that he achieves, and all he aims at." Thus, in the same way that Emerson's history depends on the "minds of men," Hawthorne's identity is both constructed and maintained—given its constancy—by that ring, by its members. Yet this meaning is also unstable: it exists within a particular circle but is "utterly devoid of significance" outside of it. Where Hawthorne outdoes Emerson is in demonstrating how much of oneself—one's goals, accomplishments, and identity—is bound

up with his or her social space. If meaning ceases to exist outside of a particular ring, then moving beyond its periphery expunges the significance from an individual. Yet Hawthorne claims doing so is beneficial—that relinquishing the meaning constructed by a certain social space (even if it is one’s significance as a person) is difficult, but ought to be done. This moral, while it pertains to his own shift in society, is critical to keep in mind for *The Scarlet Letter*, in which Hester threatens to move beyond, and thus render insignificant, the meanings that are constructed by and constitute the Puritan community.

The trope of the circle consistently applies to individuals and society in the preface, but even the one exception to this trend—in which the image relates to history—shows the circle giving way to an underlying spiral. Returning the reader from his past experience at the Custom-House, Hawthorne steps into the present moment to explain the tales and sketches that follow.⁸ Shifting his discussion from his narrative to the text at hand, Hawthorne explains that “the remainder [of the tales and sketches] are gleaned from annuals and magazines, of such antique date that they have gone round the circle, and come back to novelty again” (42). Unlike the other circles in the preface, “circle” here refers to time, the track along which history is made and retrospectively viewed (or, as Emerson would argue, re-made). Additionally, it is not a circle the texts move in or out of, but move around. The articles, which were new at one point in the past, have existed for so long that they have grown old and, like fashion, made a full revolution to become new again. This movement resembles a cyclical form of history like that of the Greeks and Romans—societies whose imaginations, as Nicholson points out, were also shaped by the Circle of Perfection. Yet Hawthorne’s circle is misleading in this case, for the texts do not just

⁸ Hawthorne initially planned on including several shorter texts in the volume, but he decided to defer their publication.

revolve around its circumference, but simultaneously move beyond it. In other words, the track of time is not a closed circle, but a spiral: one revolution brings the articles back to novelty, to where they began, but the world around them has changed, and therefore, so have they. Like Emerson's "great moments of history," the texts remain themselves, but the present moment—in which the "verge" has become the new "center"—transforms their meaning.

When Hawthorne employs circular imagery in "The Custom-House," he does so in order to grapple with issues that also appear elsewhere in the preface and the novel: the relationship between an individual and society, a conception of history and change, and the notion of authorship, including the connection between author and audience (another version of individual and society). While Hawthorne does not employ the circle every time these topics arise, the few times he does use the trope can inform the way we understand the rest of the text. From the beginning of the preface, Hawthorne invokes an image similar to the Circle of Perfection only to show that it is not attainable—which, in light of Nicholson, anticipates the shift to the spiral. The following circles reinforce this shift by initially presenting a finite, stable shape and then depicting a movement beyond it, both socially and temporally. This circle-spiral combination draws out the tension between the former's stability and finiteness and the latter's movement and growth. This is a particularly apt historical model for Hawthorne, who marks the transition between a unified, sacred cosmography and a more secular age of politics and social change. Additionally, as the preface and novel demonstrate, social change—as it plays out through individual and society—is much like Emerson describes it: reform intertwined with ossification, progress with stagnation. This coexistence of movement and arrest becomes even more relevant when the preface and novel are read side by side, for the 200-year gap between these texts

highlights the development of colonialism in America, from a fledgling colony to an expanding nation. However, Hawthorne undercuts all of the growth and change we would expect from the novel in his description of the United States in the preface, which has become stagnant and ineffectual even while it continues colonizing North America.

“The Custom-House” is set in Salem in 1848, a time when the United States was an established and expanding empire; however, the Salem Hawthorne describes is not a thriving metropolis, but a worn-out, lifeless port. Salem enjoyed its peak about fifty years before Hawthorne's return in “The Custom-House,” when it was still a “bustling wharf” whose business had not yet gone to New York or Boston (8-9). But by the time Hawthorne arrived, the town had fallen into decay and could no longer support economic growth. The deterioration of the port, which “exhibits few or no symptoms of commercial life,” is reflected in the Custom-House officers (Hawthorne 8). In the words of Dan McCall, “The aged retainers in the Custom-House are human embodiments of Salem itself: dilapidated vestiges of vitality, shells which can only suggest, as the rotting houses do, that once there was life inside them” (351). Thus, Salem resembles the “ruins of an old planet” that were once a “new continent”—or a new colony, like Hester's Boston (Emerson 213). Salem, once the “verge” of a circle, has become an old center and can no longer support the economic, human, or creative life that seeks to thrive there.

The decline of Salem also reflects a shift in America as a whole, from the optimistic hopes of settlement and democracy to the U.S. empire of 1848, symbolized by an “enormous specimen of the American eagle” that hangs above the Custom-House door (Hawthorne 8). Armed with “thunderbolts and barbed arrows,” the “unhappy fowl . . . appears, by the fierceness of her beak and eye and the general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the

inoffensive community” (Hawthorne 9). But Hawthorne goes on: “Nevertheless, vixenly as she looks, many people are seeking, at this moment, to shelter themselves under the wing of the federal eagle” (9). Though the eagle—or nation—gives no appearance of safety or protection, citizens are still drawn “under the wing” of the United States, or drawn back to the center. Yet the nation responds with an outward push, for the eagle “is apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a rankling wound from her barbed arrows” (Hawthorne 9). In Hawthorne’s time, not only was the United States expanding while trying to concentrate its power, but according to the narrator, the country cannot (or will not) provide its citizens with the protection and care they depend upon and search for. In both cases, Hawthorne senses a national paradox of inward pull—of returning to the center, to what is stable—and outward push, a movement towards the periphery.

Like the Americans who repeatedly return to the “federal eagle” only so she can “fling off her nestlings,” Hawthorne is similarly conflicted in his relationship with Salem, constantly returning only to realize that he must leave. Hawthorne’s lineage was “Planted deep” in his native town, and this long history ties him to the location: “This long connection of a family with one spot, as its place of birth and burial, creates a kindred between the human being and the locality, quite independent of any charm in the scenery or moral circumstances that surround him” (14). Despite knowing that “the connection, which has become an unhealthy one, should at last be severed,” Hawthorne continually returns to Salem as if it were “the inevitable centre of the universe” (14-5). He is conflicted by the urge to settle in Salem—to fix himself in not just a national center, but a familial center long ago established by his ancestors—and the knowledge that he must move away. As he puts it, “Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato,

if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth” (Hawthorne 14). Hawthorne admits that he is bound to Salem even though its depleted state cannot sustain his growth. Burdened by this knowledge yet unable to change it, the most he can do is create a more prosperous future for his children, freeing them from this bind. Yet critical as he is of the United States, the notion of “unaccustomed earth” is strikingly colonialist: in order to grow, Hawthorne must leave Salem (the center) and move to a periphery, which is much like American colonialism in the New World. But as Salem’s decay illustrates, colonialism entails that after a certain amount of time, each verge becomes a center, and “unaccustomed earth” must once again be sought. Like the antagonistic eagle, symbol of the United States, Salem has lost its ability to support Hawthorne but nonetheless draws him back. As a “nestling” of both Salem and the U.S., Hawthorne writes a novel in which the major crisis—what leads to the tensions between Hester and the colony—is motherhood.

The major irony of “The Custom-House” is that in the universe’s dilapidated center, Hawthorne finds the material that will begin his novel. And while the Custom-House initiates this process, it cannot sustain it; though he finds the seeds for *The Scarlet Letter* in Salem, Hawthorne’s native town proves to be “worn-out soil” for his literary endeavor. Paul Eakin’s discussion of Hawthorne’s relationship with Salem is particularly useful: “the man and the place, the artist and his setting, governed by the universal law of decay, shared a common mortal

substance” (350).⁹ The link, the common mortal substance, between an individual and social space creates a dialectical relationship between the two. And if the mortal substance of Salem—a rotten center—is shared by Hawthorne, it is quite understandable why he and his work cannot flourish. Hawthorne admits he did not know “how much longer [he] could stay in the Custom-House, and yet go forth a man” (39). Plagued by a “perpetual atmosphere of decay and near death,” neither Hawthorne nor his work can prosper (MacShane 99). However, Salem does provide him with the materials and inspiration for his novel: the scarlet letter and Surveyor Pue’s “mouldy and moth-eaten lucubration” of Hester’s story, recorded on a roll of paper (Hawthorne 33). As Eakin writes, “there lay, in the very ashes of the waste places of New England which it was [Hawthorne’s] destiny to inhabit, a mysterious principle of creativity”—in the hub of stagnation, he finds incentive for movement (355). The act of writing is critical here since it is the means by which he connects to the past in order to produce a new work of literature: he finds his inspiration in the roll of paper on which Surveyor Pue wrote Hester’s story, and he then uses the act of writing to turn these materials into *The Scarlet Letter*, which enables readers to connect with stories of the past as well. Through the act of writing, Hawthorne demonstrates one of Emerson’s principles of change: that the material of an old circle is used to create the new. Hawthorne gathers the materials—the roll of paper and the “A”—in Salem, but he must move away from this center, beyond the circle, in order to transform them into *The Scarlet Letter*.

Hawthorne was given the opportunity to move away after the presidential election of 1848, in which he was dismissed from his position as Custom-House surveyor. As Frank

⁹ Judging strictly from “The Custom-House” text, it is understandable why Eakin views “decay” as the universal law governing a location, for Salem is far deteriorated. However, “Circles” also brings to light another universal law: that of regeneration. Out of the decay of the Custom-House, Hawthorne finds relics of the past, which he gives new life in *The Scarlet Letter*.

MacShane writes, “That it was [Hawthorne’s] enemies who engineered this release, and that Hawthorne fought hard to retain his position of enthrallment, is a typical Hawthornian irony” (99). In retrospectively writing “The Custom-House,” Hawthorne is aware that Salem could not sustain him, that he ought to leave; however, at the time, he fought to stay. Despite his attempts to retain his position in Salem, the geographic and social space to which Hawthorne felt bound ultimately pushed him beyond its periphery, and as McCall suggests, “makes him take up his pen again” (354). At this point, Hawthorne moved away from Salem, becoming “a citizen of somewhere else,” which granted him what Eakin calls “aesthetic distance.” Hawthorne reflects: “some little space was requisite before my intellectual machinery could be brought to work upon the tale, with an effect any degree satisfactory” (42). While Eakin understands the “space” Hawthorne mentions as “aesthetic distance,” it can also be conceived of in Emersonian terms: because “The field cannot be well seen within the field,” Hawthorne must move out of Salem to “command a view” and “move” the materials fixed in Salem’s history (220).¹⁰ In doing so, Hawthorne breaks away from Salem and takes its “old ruins” to a new location—which, if imagined through the lens of “Circles,” is a breaking away from the antiquated circle and making a spiral-like motion away from the center.

A year after Hawthorne left Salem, he published *The Scarlet Letter*. As McCall notes, “*The Scarlet Letter* was no passport back to the land of community” for Hawthorne, and he seems to process this fact in the preface’s conclusion. He wraps up “The Custom-House” with an extended description—with such a somber tone that it borders on lamentation—of his need and

¹⁰ Eakin even notes that “The primary act of the ‘imaginative faculty’ is . . . one of transformation” (347-8). This notion resonates deeply with Emerson’s construction of new circles, which is essentially a transformation of what already exists into something new. However, in light of “Circles,” the art created by the “imaginative faculty” is one type of transformation, and if the requisite distance for this sort of conversion is applied to all change, that space is no longer merely aesthetic.

decision to move away from Salem. However, in the final paragraph Hawthorne resumes the idealistic tone of his introductory musing on authorship: “It may be, however,—O, transporting and triumphant thought!—that the great-grandchildren of the present race may sometimes think kindly of the scribbler of bygone days, when the antiquary of days to come, among the sites memorable in the town’s history, shall point out the locality of THE TOWN-PUMP!” (43).

Hawthorne imagines himself as the town-pump, an allusion to “The Rill of the Town-Pump,” a short story from his 1837 collection, *Twice-Told Tales*, in which the narrator and main character is Salem’s water spout. In this story, the town-pump is “the chief person of the municipality,” a figure of stability and endurance, for he not only maintains his post with “constancy,” but is connected to “the source of the ancient spring” that has endured the passing of generations (Hawthorne 308, 311). Yet the town-pump admits that he is a temporary fixture and wishes for a lasting remembrance: “And, when I shall have decayed, like my predecessors, then, if you revere my memory, let a marble fountain, richly sculptured, take my place upon this spot” (Hawthorne 313). The town-pump accesses the eternal spring and is a “representative of a class” that exists in perpetuity; however, this constancy is made up of an incessant churning from old to new: once a town-pump decays, another immediately takes its place. The narrator, though a part of these continuous forces, knows he is temporary and yearns for permanence.

By Hawthorne comparing himself to the town-pump, he exposes the paradoxical experience of being materially ephemeral yet connected to a permanent source and yearning for that indefinite constancy. Much like the town-pump wishes for a marble fountain, Hawthorne hopes to be remembered posthumously by the “locality of THE TOWN-PUMP,” a fixed point in Salem, one of the “sites memorable in the town’s history” (43). He fantasizes that his existence

and identity will endure despite the passage of time and the attending alterations to the town (which will surely be significant considering the changes Salem endured in the last fifty years). Central to Hawthorne's remembrance is not just the town-pump's "locality," or a fixed geographic point, but the act of writing. Just as Surveyor Pue's roll of paper preserves Hester's story, enabling Hawthorne to connect with the past, he hopes that he will be remembered as "the scribbler of bygone days," which means his writing will keep him alive in the minds of future Salemites. Thus, the act of writing serves to connect people, their ideas, and their actions throughout time. It grants some level of permanence to Hester and Hawthorne because they exist posthumously in the minds of future generations. But just as writing preserves the identities and stories of both individuals, they are also re-created (like Emerson's history) by the minds, or readers, of the present day. Hawthorne regenerates Hester's story with "as much license as if the facts had been entirely of [his] own invention," but he maintains "the authenticity of the outline" (33). Likewise, through Hawthorne's writing, future individuals can connect to his past existence as an author as well as the more distant past he regenerates in his stories—though these, too, will once again be reformed by the minds of the present. Hawthorne already states that his readers are not "the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy," that "the printed book" will not "complete his circle of existence"; however, writing can preserve some part of him—the "authenticity" of his "outline"—by connecting him and his work with readers (7). Thus, while Hawthorne understands writing as a solution to human ephemerality, this mode of preservation, permanence, and connection implies an element of change or re-creation—as Emerson would say, "Permanence is but a word of degrees" (212-3).

When Hawthorne employs circular imagery in the preface, he undercuts the notion of a finite, stable circle by portraying a movement outward, beyond the periphery, which implicitly recalls the image and motion of a spiral. Like Emerson, Hawthorne does not deliberately invoke the spiral shape anywhere in the preface or novel proper—that is, he does not use the word “spiral” or explicitly describe a turning, expanding figure. However, when he consciously employs circular imagery, the shape gives way—or combines with—a spiral, an underlying structure guiding Hawthorne’s thought and text. What results is the circle-spiral: the finiteness and stability of the Circle of Perfection alongside the infinity and fluidity of a spiral. Thus, the process of change in “Circles” is similar to that in *The Scarlet Letter* in that both authors use the circle as a literary device only to reveal the hidden spiral structure. The resulting circle-spiral draws out the tension between fixity or permanence (like a circle) and mutation or movement (like a spiral). This is important not only because the circle was transitioning into a spiral at the time Emerson and Hawthorne were writing, but because this trajectory includes a shift into the more secular issues they use the circle-spiral to grapple with. While Emerson does this more philosophically and abstractly, certain principles emerge from his treatment of the circle that inform Hawthorne’s specific narratives of social change from the 17th to 19th century.

IV. FROM “MAGIC CIRCLE” TO SPIRAL IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Arguably the strongest link between “The Custom-House” and *The Scarlet Letter* is the concept of revolution, or a massive shift in the existing social order. As Larry J. Reynolds writes, “When Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* in the fall of 1849, the fact and idea of revolution were much on his mind” (614). His preoccupation was due to the “actual revolutions, past and present, which Hawthorne had been reading about and pondering for almost twenty consecutive months” (Reynolds 615). First, the time frame in which *The Scarlet Letter* takes place (1642 to 1649) coincides with the English Civil War. Then, from 1848 to 1849, Europe experienced “wave upon wave of revolution . . . In Naples, Sicily, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Milan, Venice, Munich, Rome, and nearly all the other cities and states of continental Europe, rulers and their unpopular ministers were overthrown” (Reynolds 615). However, Hawthorne was not just thinking about social reform at two distinct points in time, but across time as well. As Doyle argues, “the most deeply historical dimension for Hawthorne’s novel” is “his brooding on the relation *between* the 1640s and 1840s” (253). Hawthorne’s selection of these two time periods for his novel and preface—connected by “the uninterrupted project of colonization” and divided by the American Revolution—give him a span of history in which he can explore America’s shift from colony to empire (Doyle 251). Focusing not just on the two endpoints, but on the transition from one to the other, Hawthorne does not have to prove that social change, or revolutions, are successful; history establishes the fact that change *has* occurred. From this point, he can explore *how* social change occurs, which he does by focusing on gender equality and exploring how the process of reform transforms this issue through the relationship between individual and society.

The problems that attend colonization are also conflicts of progress and stagnation, for both 17th-century Boston and 19th-century Salem were trying to expand while still maintaining the power of their center. In “The Custom-House,” the United States was at a point when it was facing the problems of expansion, of growing while maintaining its power and cohesion as a nation. At this point in time, Hawthorne sees around him economic decay, reflected both in Salem and in the bodies of his peers. In Emersonian terms, the United States had become a center, but it had not moved to a new verge—a national embodiment of the institutional ossification Emerson found in the Unitarians. From this point, Hawthorne turns back 200 years to Boston as a fledgling colony—the verge of a circle whose center was England. Returning to the 1640s, one might expect to find the vitality lacking in 19th-century Salem: an ideal moment of freedom, fluidity, pre-ossification. However, what Hawthorne presents is quite the opposite: a Puritan community that was once insurgent but only revolted in order to institute their own strictures and beliefs. As Robert M. Fossum explains, “these Bostonian colonists have rebelled against the authority of England only to endow their own forms of authority with the ‘sacredness of divine institutions’ (*SL*, p. 64), unchangingly applicable, unchangingly just” (108-9). Boston embodies the “inert effort” Emerson attributes to “an empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite,” which “solidify and hem in the life” immediately after a new circle is formed (214). Hawthorne demonstrates this resistance by opening the novel not with Hester’s act of transgression, but the societal backlash against it—not the rebel, but the prison.

Which leads us to the other major historical reality of the mid-1800s: the birth of incarceration. Hawthorne may not have been thinking directly about prison models such as the panopticon or the Auburn system as Emerson was, but *The Scarlet Letter* is fundamentally about

the use of discipline and punishment to maintain social order. Like mass incarceration, the Boston colony uses penal codes to identify and contain what they reject, so as to prevent the transgression and transgressor from threatening the status quo. Prisons change the relationship between individual and society: incarceration excludes insurgent individuals not by casting them out of society, but by containing them within it, resulting in a sort of inclusive isolation. The colony employs a similar punishment to prevent Hester from further challenging their moral and legal strictures. While Hester does start out in a prison, her actual sentence begins when she emerges and re-enters society. The colony establishes her as the center of its attention in order to both alienate and contain her; she is excluded from society yet plays an essential role in defining it. Hawthorne depicts this relationship between individual and society through the trope of the circle: Hester stands at the center of the community, completely surrounded and drawing the attention of all inward towards her and her stigmatization. It is not until Hester escapes this position of centrality, moving outwards to the social periphery, that she initiates progress. Thus, the process of social change appears as a shift from a closed circle, wherein the circumference stands in an unchanging relationship to the center, to a spiral-like movement out of that center and to the periphery. By tracing the trope of the circle, we can understand how an individual and society form and maintain the initial circle as well as how they ultimately break it, resulting in a movement toward social reform.

About midway through the novel, Hawthorne engages—or allows Hester to engage—in an extensive rumination on gender equality and the prospect of social reform. At this point, the colonists have begun to assign new meanings to the scarlet letter, like the emblem standing for “Able” or having “the effect of the cross on a nun’s bosom” (Hawthorne 141-2). However,

Hester's relationship to the Puritan community—the relationship the scarlet letter puts her in—has not changed, and this bond between individual and society results in her “Standing alone in the world” with “a freedom of speculation” (Hawthorne 143). In other words, “the effect of the symbol—or rather, of the position in respect to society that was indicated by it—on the mind of Hester Prynne herself was powerful and peculiar” (Hawthorne 142). Hawthorne then goes on to detail the “powerful and peculiar” effect on Hester's mind: she wonders if “the whole race of womanhood” ought to accept its existence and decides that for herself, the answer is negative; she ponders the steps one would take so that women could “assume what seems a fair and suitable position” in society, deeming it a “hopeless task” because such change would require one to dismantle society, rebuild it, and essentially changing the nature of each gender (Hawthorne 144). Ultimately, Hester finds herself trapped in “the dark labyrinth of mind,” at times even considering murder and suicide in order to spare Pearl and herself from what she views as a bleak existence in a flawed society (Hawthorne 145). At this point—after a several-page exploration of Hester's relationship with society, its resulting mental effects, her struggle with gender inequality, and the contemplation of social reform—Hawthorne states, in a one-line paragraph, that “The scarlet letter had not done its office” (145).

Because this line is preceded by a paragraph-long criticism of Puritan gender relations and the potential of reform, two questions arise—and I feel ought to arise—when I reach this sentence. The first question is “according to whom?” That is, who determines the scarlet letter's “office”? And the second question is “why?”—in what way has the scarlet letter “not done its office”? Sacvan Bercovitch claims that the “office of the scarlet letter” is “to lead from the willful self-binding of a truth . . . to the redemptive vision of many possible truths” (13). In other

words, the scarlet letter is not meant to make Hester (or the reader) “choose between the reasons of the heart and the claims of institutions,” but to recognize that each is incomplete and to accommodate them both (Bercovitch 8). I would argue that this sort of pluralism is also the “office” of the passage, of saying that the red emblem has not accomplished its goal. The scarlet letter has many potential “offices,” and they are all “not done” for various reasons depending on who defines them. Obviously, the Puritans have their own definition: to resist the alteration of (and threat to) the existing social contours. And in a way, the scarlet letter accomplishes this goal. Hester does not commit adultery again, and she goes on to live within the bounds of Puritan law. However, the scarlet letter also takes her to the brink of reform; it is her “passport” into a “moral wilderness” where her mind has “roamed as freely as the wild Indian” and “criticized all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church” (Hawthorne 174). By comparing her to an “Indian,” Hawthorne intensifies Hester’s criticism, suggesting that she views the community like a Native American would view colonialism: as an oppressive and unjustified siege on her freedom. Though Hester is not physically rebellious—that is, does not again transgress social limits—she mentally pushes the boundaries of the colony and even muses on complete social reconstruction. Because the scarlet letter has not eradicated any and all thoughts, actions, or inclinations to transgress social boundaries, for the Puritan community, the scarlet letter has not accomplished its goal.¹¹ Even though some colonists have adopted a more positive attitude

¹¹ Doyle points out that “Puritanism itself entailed ‘freedom of speculation’ in religious as well as legal practice,” but Hawthorne “characterizes ‘our forefathers’ as relatively ignorant of their free thinking” (261). While *The Scarlet Letter* is an historical romance, it deviates from historical fact in many ways, this being one. (Doyle also notes Hawthorne’s occlusion of slavery, transatlantic trade, and the leniency of Hester’s punishment while Reynolds establishes the historical inaccuracy of the scaffold.) Therefore, I am basing my argument on how Hawthorne presents Puritans in the novel rather than the historical reality of the 1640s.

towards Hester and are reinterpreting the letter, this is based on her appearance and actions.

Meanwhile, her interior is only apparent to the reader, who is aware that the letter did not fulfill its original aim (for the colonists).

By this point in the novel, however, readers likely have their own opinions about what the scarlet letter's "office" should be, and I would argue that most are inclined to disagree with the colonists' opinion. Because the reader stands at a great temporal distance from 17th-century Boston, alterations to the status quo are not threats, but progress, which fosters a desire for (or at least an expectation of) action and change in the novel. As Doyle puts it, "Hawthorne allows us to embrace [Hester] as the rebel-progenitor of 'our' community" (262). However, when it comes to the obstacles of social change, "A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought" (Hawthorne 144-5). And this is why, for the reader, the scarlet letter has not fulfilled its purpose. While it enables Hester to *think* about change—has a "powerful and peculiar" effect on her mind—the red symbol prevents her from taking action, and therefore it does not fully accomplish its goal in the reader's eyes. Ultimately, the scarlet letter's "office" is unfinished because it enables Hester to think but not act: for the Puritans, the emblem has not tamed her thought, and for the reader, it has not prompted her to take action.

However, the scarlet letter's effect—allowing Hester to think but deterring her from acting—does not come from its meaning, but from where it locates her in relation to the colony. Once again, "The effect of the symbol" is "the position in respect to society that was indicated by it," and this positioning of individual and society grants her mental freedom while inhibiting physical action (Hawthorne 142). But where exactly *are* individual and society with respect to each other, and why does the scarlet letter put them in this particular position? Hawthorne

responds to these questions with his use of circular imagery in the text, especially in the latter half of the novel. He uses the trope of the circle in order to represent the relationship between Hester and the colony—and to grapple with the issues of social change that depend on this relationship. By tracing this imagery, we can understand exactly what Hester’s “position in respect to society” looks like, how the scarlet letter casts her in this position, and how it hampers or furthers the social change that Hester contemplates.

I do not wish to suggest that Hawthorne only uses circular imagery with regard to Hester or that he only uses it in the second half of the novel. In fact, his use of the circle is frequent and rather varied: Chillingworth has a “circle of ominous shadow” following him while a “circle of radiance” appears around Pearl, much like the “illuminated circle” of Reverend Wilson’s lantern (81, 131, 153); Hester and Pearl stand in “the same circle of seclusion,” and an “inviolable circle” is drawn around Pearl, resulting in her small “circle of acquaintance” (84, 85); Pearl also inhabits a “magic circle” of light in the forest, and later in that scene Hester occupies the “magic circle of this hour,” which admits Dimmesdale into “the circle of [Hester’s] feelings” (160, 177, 182); and from that point, a “magic circle” appears around Hester twice in the market-place (204, 214). Despite the differences between each “circle,” they all highlight the issue of stasis and change, or movement and fixity. My focus is on Hester’s “circles” because they best demonstrate the effect of the scarlet letter, the relationship between individual and society, and the way social change occurs throughout the novel. Hawthorne’s deliberate use of the circle as a literary device (especially those that relate to Hester) yields to the spiral, though like Emerson, he does not explicitly invoke this shape. Instead, the stability of a traditional circle conflicts with the implicit movement of a spiral, a combination that arises from the tensions of permanence and flux in

Hawthorne's own historical moment and in the trajectory of the circle as a literary form.

Additionally, the circle-spiral highlights those same conflicts in Boston's social reform, which play out in the relationship between individual and community and each party's interest in either challenging or maintaining the status quo.

Scholars have written relatively little about circular imagery in Hawthorne's work, as they tend to gravitate towards more explicit symbolic images, such as the mirror or the neutral territory between real life and the imagination. Harry C. West attributes this trend to "the fact that Hawthorne never discusses [the circle] as he does the neutral territory metaphor, never insists upon it as a symbol as he does the image of the mirror, seldom explicates its meaning" (312). However, over the past several decades, scholars have used this abundant, albeit subtle, image to refine our understanding of Hawthorne and his work. D. G. Kehl, the first to provide a comprehensive outline of circle-sphere imagery in Hawthorne's novels, established this avenue of analysis by demonstrating that "the interaction of [spheres and circles] provides both the structural method and the central meaning" of Hawthorne's texts (10). Following in Kehl's footsteps, West adds that the image of the circle is important to Hawthorne as a person and enriches our understanding of his creative process and product. As he argues, the "magic circle" can "illuminate the process by which Hawthorne transformed his imaginative vision into art" (West 312). Finally, Fossum understands the circle as time itself, revealing "the unity of past, present, and future," as well as the characters' (and Hawthorne's) relationships with each temporal aspect. His argument comes closest to my own, for time and history (and thus historical change) are inseparable; history is made of accumulated changes over time. This is perhaps why he, too, confronts "tensions between permanence and flux" in the novel, noting the necessary yet

dangerous reliance on the past as societies and individuals evolve (Fossum 108-9). The temporal aspects of *The Scarlet Letter* are also of interest to me, but rather than focusing on whether the characters' actions engender a continuity of past, present, and future, I am more concerned with how temporality plays into social change. That is, when each category is invoked, relied upon, pushed away, and what tensions exist between individual and societal interactions with the past, present, and future as they either promote or resist reform.

On the other hand, critics have often addressed the relationship between individual and society in *The Scarlet Letter*, but none have examined these topics *though* the trope of the circle. O. Alan Weltzien comes closest to doing so, reading broken circles as “the emblems of interrupted festivity” which “hold in tension the contrary states of community and individuality, interdependence and isolation” (16). However, his argument is deflated by the fact that he does not trace Hawthorne's use of the word “circle” throughout the novel (though he does in the other romances he examines). Doing so would reveal that Hawthorne almost always uses circular imagery in a way unrelated to social gaiety or harmony; instead, this figure most often represents separation, exclusion, and stigmatization (which also draws out “the contrary states of community and individuality, interdependence and isolation”). Aside from Weltzien, critics have only engaged with the circle as a vehicle for their own argument, using it as Hawthorne does in his novel. Mona Scheuermann, who compares *The Scarlet Letter* with Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, views the central struggle of Hawthorne's novel as the “collapse in the relationship which forces the individual out of the human circle,” a move which “cannot ever be truly repaired” (189-90). For R. W. B. Lewis, the characters' “pattern of escape and return”—which is initiated by the both harmful and nourishing relationship between society and individual—are “circular

journeys” (322). However, for him, the individual finally re-enters society, surrendering to “ultimate arrest” (Lewis 322). While my interest also lies in the relationship between individual and society, I seek to investigate how the text explores the tension between a revolutionary individual and a resistant society, and how this affects social reform. Furthermore, I will do so by examining the trope of the circle, through which I will map out the relationship between individual and community and then follow the figure’s transition into the spiral to understand how forces of movement and resistance operate within the process of social change.

When thinking about social change and the figure of the circle, one must consider the two meanings of the word “revolution”: one highlighting the stability and finiteness of the Circle of Perfection and the other exemplifying the motion and expansion of a spiral. According to Emerson, new circles are drawn through the inevitable process of change in which an individual, community, or empire “bursts over that boundary on all sides” and moves the “center” of the circle to its “verge” (214, 222). This process is “revolution” in the sense of massively shifting the social order, or the sort of change that gender reform would require, according to the Hester’s contemplation. Just as “the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew,” this sense of revolution moves away from the original circle and its center, or the existing social limits, resulting in a spiral-like shape (Hawthorne 144). Or as Emerson would say, it takes the “ruins of an old planet” and regenerates them in order to create a new one (213). On the other hand, “revolution” also means revolving around a circle, which is a cyclical return to where an individual, community, or empire began. It implies a stable circumference, and because every point on a circle’s circumference is equidistant to its center, this notion of revolution also means that the center is unmoving. The trope of the circle is a vehicle for tracing these two competing

notions of revolution—one progressive and spiral-like, the other stable and circle-like—throughout *The Scarlet Letter*. Moreover, doing so shows that they not only coexist, but are bound to each other: you need the original circle to break into a spiral, you need stability to enact change, and you need society in order to reform it. This coexistence also reflects Emerson's and Hawthorne's moment in the literary history of the circle—they stand on the cusp of modernity, just before the spiral fully permeates literature, in a place of transition from philosophies of finiteness and unity to a history that accounts for instability and an infinite notion of colonialism.

This essential coexistence and interdependence of stability and flux appears in Hawthorne's use of circular imagery regardless of the scene or its main character. Take for instance Chillingworth's "circle of ominous shadow": as Hester watches him picking herbs, she wonders, "Did the sun, which shone so brightly everywhere else, really fall upon him? Or was there, as it rather seemed, a circle of ominous shadow moving along with his deformity, whichever way he turned himself?" (Hawthorne 153). The circle is "moving along" with Chillingworth as he turns, yet it remains a circle—the same stable, perfect shape. Furthermore, Chillingworth continues to move, but because the circle moves along with him, he remains its constant center. On the other hand, if the "ominous shadow" is in fact created by the sun (assuming it does "fall upon him"), then the sun's path in the sky ought to change the shape of the circle; however, the shadow once again maintains its circular shape. Although this use of the circle is not about Hester, her relationship with society, or the social change she envisions, it contributes to a theory of circles in the novel in which fixity and movement coexist. Like Chillingworth's "circle of ominous shadow," Hester typically appears fixed at the center of a stable circle, secured in her relationship with society, but from this place of fixity or permanence

she is able to contemplate social progress. In fact, without the initial stability of this circle, Hester would not be able to incite the change that she does—she could not shift the center, breaking away from circle to spiral.

For the majority of the novel, Hawthorne represents Hester's relationship to the colony with a circle in which she stands fixed at its center, surrounded by the colonists. For example, during the New England holiday, Hester stands amidst a crowd of colonists who simultaneously encompass and exclude her: "As was usually the case wherever Hester stood, a small, vacant area—a sort of magic circle—had formed itself about her into which, though the people were elbowing one another at a little distance, none ventured, or felt disposed to intrude" (Hawthorne 204). First, Hester "stood" in the "magic circle," which renders her physically static—she is in one spot, unmoving. She also draws the attention of the colonists in towards herself, not only standing as a fixed center, but maintaining stability and cohesion at the circle's circumference as well. Hester's relationship with the colonists is much like the oppressive relationship created by a prison, and the circle even seems an inverted panopticon with the Puritans surrounding and watching Hester as she stands in the center. Like a prison, the "magic circle" distances individual and society, though the colony contains Hester at the same time that it excludes her—she is at the center of society, but alienated from it. Additionally, this circle perpetuates social stasis by completely surrounding and containing the individual, which results not in a revolution that would shift the social order and move the center, but one in which the center (and therefore circumference) is stable and constantly revolving *around* it.

As a sort of mobile prison, the "magic circle" carries out the scarlet letter's intended "office": to stigmatize Hester, securing her in a relationship with society that simultaneously

contains and excludes her. Hawthorne often refers to the scarlet letter as a “stigma,” which represents something or someone that society rejects—in this case, Hester and her crime. The stigma distances the stigma-wearer from society, though it also defines society by showing what it is *not*. In other words, a stigma constitutes society by defining its limits. This is the function of the scarlet letter: as Fossum says, “the red emblem isolates [Hester] socially and spatially,” but “the sin that separates is also the tie that binds” (112). The colony’s fixation on Hester’s crime (and the scarlet letter, its symbol) isolates her from the community while drawing her to the center of its attention. Even once the meaning of the scarlet letter has become ambiguous or varied, as it has by the New England holiday, the stigma’s effect is evident in “the instinctive, though no longer unkindly, withdrawal of her fellow-creatures” (Hawthorne 204). Thus, while the colony uses the stigma to reject Hester for crossing moral boundaries, they also utilize this rejection (or stigmatization) to reinforce those limits—to mark where society ends and she begins. So long as they maintain that “magic circle,” which keeps this boundary clear, the strictures that constitute the Puritan society will remain stable.

To successfully maintain the existing social limits, a society must contain the insurgent individual while also distancing itself from him or her, which explains why Hester’s only activity in a “circle” occurs outside of the colony, in a place where she cannot be surrounded or contained. During her forest rendezvous with Dimmesdale, Hester removes the scarlet letter and experiences a transfiguration in which her freedom and femininity return:

The stigma gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. O exquisite relief! She had not known the weight, until she felt the freedom! By another impulse, she took off the formal cap

that confined her hair; and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance, and imparting the charm of softness to her features. There played around her mouth, and beamed out of her eyes, a radiant and tender smile, that seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood. A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek, that had been long so pale. Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and clustered themselves, with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour. (Hawthorne 176-7)

Away from the colony, Hester is able to remove the scarlet letter, eliminating society's stigmatization as well as her own "burden of shame and anguish." In doing so, she undoes the effects of the stigma: fixing her at the center of a circle in which she is both surrounded by and isolated from society—a position that allows the Puritans to contain her and thereby preserve the existing social order. Hester herself represents this shift away from confinement, as everything about her is in motion: her shame "departed"; her "confined" hair "fell"; her smile "played," "beamed" and is "gushing"; her cheek is "glowing"; "Her sex, her youth . . . came back" and "clustered." Hawthorne's use of active verbs also emphasizes the sense of activity and motion: Hester "heaved," "felt," and "took off." Additionally, the fact that Hester's former aspects "came back from what men call the irrevocable past" suggests a real possibility of change even when it is believed to be impossible. While the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the "prevailing sense" of the word "irrevocable" as "That [which] cannot be revoked, repealed, annulled, or undone; unalterable, irreversible," this definition does not seem appropriate for the passage. What "came

back” from the “irrevocable past” was not “revoked” or “undone” in anyway; it simply moves into the present moment. Instead, the earliest meaning of “irrevocable” seems more apt: “That [which] cannot be called, brought, fetched, or taken back; that [which] is beyond recall or recovery.”¹² In this sense of the word, Hester reclaims her past self from a (supposedly) fixed, inaccessible history, transporting what *men say* cannot be moved. Not only does she revive her femininity from the static past to the active present, but she simultaneously disproves a truth established by the opposite gender. Because her femininity displaces male authority, the “magic circle” in the forest makes progress towards the “fair and suitable position” Hester imagines women assuming in her contemplation of gender reform (Hawthorne 144). Thus, Hester’s transformation in the forest demonstrates the change she is capable of effecting outside the confines of society.

However, Hester’s transfiguration only occurs within “the magic circle of this hour,” a period of time in which she is extricated from the colony, does not wear the scarlet letter, and in which Pearl is absent; however, once this time elapses, Pearl returns and Hester reverts to her former role as a stable center.¹³ Because Pearl is “the scarlet letter endowed with life”—a living embodiment of the stigma that fixes Hester in her relationship with the colony—her absence is critical to Hester’s transfiguration (Hawthorne 90). However, once Pearl returns, Hester realizes

¹² This sense of the word was used in the mid-1800s particularly to describe history and the past. In 1866, H. P. Liddon, a theologian and clergyman of the Church of England invoked this definition in a series of lectures before the University of Oxford. He claims that “History . . . points to the irrevocable and unchanging past,” and referring to “the moral realities of the Christian life,” he says, “Regarded historically these events belong to the irrevocable past” (95, 345). Of course, these lectures took place over a decade after *The Scarlet Letter* was published, but if Liddon’s use of “irrevocable” is representative of how writers and speakers of the 19th century talk specifically about history, this would further suggest that Hawthorne is not using the *OED*’s “prevailing sense” of the word.

¹³ Hester is not entirely alone during her transformation because Dimmesdale is in the scene as well. However, the decision to leave Boston and remove the scarlet letter is almost entirely Hester’s rather than the result of their reciprocity. For example, Hester commands “Thou wilt go!” and the next paragraph begins: “The decision once made” (Hawthorne 176). In this way, Dimmesdale contrasts with Pearl, who pushes back against Hester’s actions.

the consequences of defying social norms. Upon the child's entrance, there is an immediate shift in their social landscape: "Since she rambled from her side, another inmate had been admitted within the circle of the mother's feelings, and so modified the aspect of them all, that Pearl, the returning wanderer, could not find her wonted place, and hardly knew where she was" (Hawthorne 181-2). The change in Hester's own "circle"—Dimmesdale's entry—"so modified the aspect of them all," which sounds strikingly Emersonian.¹⁴ In the words of James Guthrie, "Introduce one new element into a system, one new fact, new person, or new book, says Emerson, and everything may be instantly changed" (109). And indeed, everything is "instantly changed" for Pearl: she "could not find her wonted place, and hardly knew where she was." A change in one circle throws off all prior points of stability and familiarity; there is no landmark with which Pearl can locate herself in the new landscape. Imagining this scene as the aftermath of Hester's transfiguration, and therefore a miniature version of actual social reform, one can only imagine the unsettling effects of large-scale social change, such as a full-blown revolution in gender dynamics. If Hester's two actions—admitting Dimmesdale and removing the scarlet letter—can throw off all of Pearl's bearings, then projecting those effects onto the colony's scale demonstrates the terrifying and uncomfortable effects of social reform.

Unsurprisingly, Pearl rejects the "modification" to the existing social configuration. She has a "wild outbreak with piercing shrieks" in which she "suddenly burst into a fit of passion, gesticulating wildly, and throwing her small figure into the most extravagant contortions," ultimately demanding that Hester resume wearing the scarlet letter (Hawthorne 183). Pearl's

¹⁴ The word "aspect" has a dual meaning to consider: on the one hand, Hawthorne might mean that the characters' physical appearances are unrecognizable, but on the other hand (and more likely), each character's position in the social configuration—the directional or orientational sense of "aspect"—has altered.

reaction is riotous, animalistic, and even resembles demonic possession, but it is understandable at the same time. She no longer has a “wonted place”; she stands disoriented with no point of reference; the changes that occurred during Pearl’s ramble in the woods have completely upended the world she knows. Recognizing that the scarlet letter’s absence is the catalyst for these changes, Pearl does whatever she can to reverse its effects. Rendered in this way, her response microcosmically recalls the colony’s reactions to change (or threats of change) before and throughout the novel. As Lewis puts it, Hester’s initial crime is “a disturbance of the moral structure of the universe,” transgressing the moral and legal boundaries of 1640s Boston and threatening the principles that define the colonists’ social space (320). To restore order to their “universe,” the Puritans push forcefully back, first confining Hester to the prison then ordering her to wear the scarlet letter for life (which is relatively lenient, considering that some of the colonists advocate for capital punishment). Hester’s sentence, while harsh to Hawthorne or the modern reader, defends the current state of the Puritans’ world; it protects everything that is familiar and secure, that which infuses their existence with stability. Hester’s transgression, if unchecked, could encourage further infractions, possibly leading to a major shift in the social order. Just as Pearl’s “wild outbreak” seems less outlandish in light of her disorientation, the Puritans’ severe punishments are more understandable (though not necessarily “right”) in light of the potential chaos and bewilderment that would occur without the pushback.

Pearl’s reaction, like the colonists’ sentence, effectively drives back Hester’s advances on the status quo. After Pearl’s “fit of passion,” Hester attempts to compromise by asking Pearl to bring the scarlet letter to her, but Pearl is steadfast, commanding, ““Come thou and take it up!””—and Hester concedes. Just as Hester shifts from inactivity to movement in her

transfiguration, her regression to passivity is equally evident and located precisely at the moment in which the scarlet letter is re-fastened: “she advanced to the margin of the brook, took up the scarlet letter, and fastened it again into her bosom . . . she thus received back this deadly symbol from the hand of fate” (Hawthorne 184). First, Hester “advanced,” “took up,” and “fastened”—she actively readopts the scarlet letter, as indicated by the narrator’s active voice. Yet just two sentences later, (once the scarlet letter is on) the narrator reiterates, and this time Hester “received” the symbol, and “fate” drives the action. Similarly, when the colony initially sentences Hester to wear the scarlet letter, she adopts a passive role in which she is fixed at the center of society. Coming from a large social body, this push towards stasis is actually a collective “fit of passion” in the Puritan community, stemming from the potential of complete disorientation and upheaval. And just as the colony sentences Hester to wear the stigma of the scarlet letter, so Pearl commands that Hester take up the red emblem once again.¹⁵

When Hester returns from the forest, she once again assumes the role of stable center in the “magic circles” of the market-place. Just before Dimmesdale’s Election Sermon, when Hester is soon to “fling aside the burning letter, it had strangely become the centre of more remark and excitement, and was thus made to sear her breast more painfully, than at any time since the first day she put it on” (Hawthorne 214). The effects of the scarlet letter are just as strong as they are at the beginning of the novel, and they are intensified by colonists’ attention—their “remark and excitement.” However, the symbol’s effect is not simply the physical sensation Hester experiences, but the way it positions her in relation to society. And just as the stigma was initially

¹⁵ The parallel between Pearl and the colony—that they both oppose and subdue Hester’s advances on the status quo—is bizarre considering that she is a living embodiment of the act that initially threatened Puritan principles. While it is not within the scope of my essay to explain why Hawthorne chooses to make Pearl the voice of the colony or to detail the implications of this choice, I must point out that this oddity exists in the text.

used to simultaneously contain and exclude Hester, she finds herself in this relationship with society once again: “Hester stood in that magic circle of ignominy, where the cunning cruelty of her sentence seemed to have fixed her forever” (Hawthorne 214). Once more, the colonists’ attention gravitates inward: the scarlet letter becomes the “centre” of their “remark and excitement,” and Hester stands at the center of the “magic circle.” She is once again stigmatized by the scarlet letter—and not because of its meaning (i.e. the fact that she committed adultery), but because it positions her inside the circle, surrounded by the colony. Neither individual nor society move in this circle—like the perfect geometric shape, the center is “fixed,” and therefore so is the circumference. Instead, the “magic circle” is one in which public attention and personal mortification feed into each other to not only create a barrier between individual and society, but connect them in their mutual separation and keep each party “fixed” in the divide.¹⁶

If the return to this “magic circle” is disappointing after Hester’s transformation in the forest, then her return to Boston after leaving the colony is significantly more deflating—or at least appears so at first. After she “disappeared” for “many years,” Hester returns to Boston and takes up the scarlet letter for the final time: “She had returned, therefore, and resumed,—of her

¹⁶ To put this in other words, the isolation Hester experiences is due to an interdependence between herself and society. I rephrase the “magic circle” dynamic in this way because isolation and interdependence are themes that have attracted many critics; however, some scholars view the isolation-independence motif as a binary rather than a cooperative duo. For instance, Arne I. Axelsson studies the structure of the novel through this motif, arguing that “From a generally shattered and isolated position with respect to society and each other, the characters move towards more coherence and greater interdependence [throughout the novel]” (132). He does account for a gray area in between “isolation” and “interdependence,” but they are ultimately opposing end points on a social spectrum. This duality makes sense because alienation and interconnectedness *seem* diametrically opposed—or at least an individual alienated from society would appear different than one connected with society. However, Axelsson does not acknowledge that isolation arises out of an interdependence between individual and society.

Similarly, Mona Scheuermann argues that *The Scarlet Letter* is fundamentally about “man as he stands outside of the human circle, trying to understand himself and his own relation to those still within the bounds of society” (182). Again, I do not completely refute her argument, but “the human circle,” if one considers circle imagery in the novel, does not simply include society and exclude those isolated from it; it draws together Hester and the colony just as it separates them. Whereas she views the “circle” and the “bounds of society” as serving a strictly exclusive function, I would also consider their binding effect.

own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it,—resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale” (Hawthorne 227). Initially, this return seems a self-inflicted punishment that once again traps Hester in her previous relationship with society, fixing her at the center of yet another circle and perpetually stifling her potential to enact social change. And a case can certainly be made for her passivity: Hester stays in her cottage, choosing to “comfort” and “counsel,” to “assure” a “firm belief” in future change but not actively generate it (Hawthorne 227).¹⁷ However, when Hester returns, she does not resume her position as the focus of the colony’s attention, surrounded by her community.

The circle that once contained and anchored Hester is broken, and she resides on the verge of the colony, in her cottage by the sea-shore. As Doyle puts it, “We meet her as the figure turning between two worlds” (267). Instead of the colonists gravitating *inwards* toward her, they leave the center of Boston to seek advice at Hester’s cottage. She no longer represents a limit of the community—what the colony is *not*—but is now a springboard from which further movement can take place. On the threshold of the colony, Hester can advise her visitors, using intellect and communication to incite social change. After all, Emerson’s “great moments of history” are the “performance through the strength of ideas” and “works of genius” (227). Hester is now in a position to communicate that genius, her ideas about a “new truth” that will “establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual

¹⁷ Critics have noted the power of society—or the individual-society relationship—in Hester’s return to Boston. Lewis claims that Hawthorne “customarily brought his sufferers back *into* the community,” for “he could always see beyond the hope [of escape] to the inevitable return” (322). According to Lewis, the unavoidable return to society brings “light and strength” to the individual (322). In a less optimistic argument, Scheuermann claims that the novel demonstrates how “the machinery of society can act to engage and crush a victim in its gears” (188). I fall in between these two critics: while I would argue that Hester is not “crushed” by the colony—after all, she retains her own thought and free will—she is certainly “engaged” with society to the point where her “real life” exists in Boston, perpetually estranged from society yet connected to it in her isolation (Hawthorne 227). Yet this engagement does offer a certain “light and strength” because even though Hester does not exert the physical activity that social reform requires, she can still access the freedom of thought that the scarlet letter initially granted her.

happiness” (Hawthorne 227). Thus, she turns outward from center to periphery in a spiral-like motion, breaking the circle that maintained social stasis and prompting the evolution that we, as readers, can see in history. Hester finally puts her thoughts into action, which for the reader, means that the scarlet letter ultimately fulfills its “office”: it not only gives her the space to develop her ideas, but she ultimately uses the symbol to remain a part of society, communicate her thoughts, and draw colonists out to a new center.

Given the paradoxical nature of the scarlet letter’s “office,” the initial circle is critical to Hester’s movement beyond it and her subsequent contribution to social progress. Reform *does* require a departure from the old center or status quo, but she is empowered just as much by the circle, and without it, the change in the novel would not be possible. Because the scarlet letter positions Hester at the center of society, it establishes a buffer between herself and the colony, a distance that allows her to criticize the status quo and contemplate reform. Hester’s thoughts (and the communication of those thoughts) are the primary vehicles for social change, and paradoxically, the scarlet letter—society’s mode of subduing disobedience—grants her the “freedom of speculation” to develop these ideas (Hawthorne 143). Without the “freedom” that attends her inclusive isolation in society, Hester’s ideas would not have a space in which to flourish. Or as Emerson would say, without first being “hemmed in” by the colony, she could not have “burst over that boundary” (214). Just as Hawthorne gathers his materials for *The Scarlet Letter* in Salem but must leave to write it, and just as Emerson’s “new continents are built out of the ruins of an old planet,” Hester gathers her ideas of a “new truth” inside the circle, surrounded by society, but must break away in order to initiate progress (Emerson 213). Thus, Hester’s relationship with and movement away from “circles” in the novel demonstrates a process of

social change in which transgressive individuals stand inside the circle, contained by society, and prevented from crossing social boundaries. These transgressors initiate the process of reform when they cross the circle's threshold and, like a spiral, create a new center out of the old. Like Hester, they are then no longer a limit, but a portal that opens away from the old center and towards further change.

If Hawthorne were to end on this note, he would fulfill his initial promise of revolution and restore enough balance for the novel to meet the standards of a romance; however, *The Scarlet Letter* does not ultimately point the reader towards further progress—in fact, it does the opposite. After Hester finally “bursts over that boundary,” the moral confines of the Puritan community, Hawthorne “hems in the life” in a more literal sense, for the novel ends with Hester's death and burial. After an entire novel in which Hester is condemned for *her* crime—not hers *and* Dimmesdale's—and in which she uses this individuality and isolation to initiate change in her society, Hawthorne virtually erases her individual existence. One tombstone stands for both her and Dimmesdale, and instead of the typical “armorial bearings” that identify the ancestry of the deceased, it bears a “herald's wording”: “ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A. GULES” (Hawthorne 228). Not only is Hester's name withheld, but her entire lineage is now symbolized by the scarlet letter, the emblem society used to reject her, contain her, and preserve its own principles, practices, and beliefs. Just as Hawthorne initially “hems” Hester in by concealing her within the prison, and just as the colonists hem her in by drawing her into the center of society, so Hester is finally contained: her life is enclosed by her death; her body is confined within the cemetery's bounds and within her grave plot; her individual existence is

occluded by the tombstone she shares with Dimmesdale and its “herald’s wording”; and finally, she is hemmed in by the back cover—the end of the novel.

Like Hester’s tombstone, the novel is “relieved only by one ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow”: the fact that she breaks out of the “circle,” the colony, and is able to at least initiate gender reform (Hawthorne 228). The end of *The Scarlet Letter* is not wholly imbalanced, for Hawthorne offers a glimpse of potential social change—though he immediately subverts this hope by pointing the reader to the resistance and stagnation that progress incurs. Hawthorne depicts the prospect of change, cultivates the reader’s hope for it, but this feeds directly into the forces preventing that change. Unlike Emerson, who reassures the reader that reform is inevitable —“But the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses it already tends outward with a vast force and to immense and innumerable expansions”—Hawthorne asks the reader whether we, as individuals, communities, and nations, can overcome the obstacles progress inevitably faces (214). Both authors depict the paradoxical process of an ever-changing yet ossified reform, but rather than emphasizing the former aspect—the constant change—Hawthorne’s final note amplifies the force of stagnation.

V. CONCLUSION

In the opening chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne writes, “The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison” (45). Likewise, Hawthorne allots a portion of Hester’s story—the beginning—to the prison and allots the end to the cemetery. Her tale of adultery is ironically the “virgin soil” on which Hawthorne establishes his own vision of society. Like a new colony, Hawthorne’s decision to open and close *The Scarlet Letter* with the prison and cemetery is a “practical necessity.” On a personal level, Hawthorne felt that much of himself was bound up with Salem, yet he feared staying would turn him into “such another animal as the old Inspector” (39). He expresses a similar ambivalence towards the United States as well: the Custom-House surveyorship supplies Hawthorne with a means of living, yet he criticizes the person who “leans on the mighty arm of the Republic” (38). Furthermore, the U.S. was experiencing a moment of simultaneous expansion and polarization in the decade leading up to the Civil War, which resulted in the struggle to maintain power as a national center. As “The Custom-House” and *The Scarlet Letter* demonstrate, and as Hawthorne’s historical moment informs us, stability promotes a desire for change—to leave what is established and secure—but is also necessary in order to make that progress.

By using the novel’s narrative in order to work through issues of his own society, Hawthorne not only conflates issues of colonialism and gender, but he establishes Hester’s evolution as a way in which to read 19th-century America and the more general process of social change that links the 1640s and 1840s. Moreover, he addresses issues of his own time in an

oblique and non-threatening way. As Doyle puts it, “By way of this characterization of Hester’s isolation and *imaginative* freedom . . . Hawthorne makes the colony a more innocent place than it was and makes freedom a less materially ‘levelling’ force” (261). In other words, he feminizes progress in order to make it more palatable and less threatening to his own society. If the novel presented reform as “materially levelling,” readers and critics may have responded with their own “fit of passion” like Pearl and the Puritans, immediately rejecting Hawthorne’s criticism and contemplation of social reform.

However, Hawthorne’s treatment of gender extends beyond this particular function. Because Hester is a woman, she is not part of the ossified, decision-making center—the male magistrates that ultimately decide her punishment. Because she stands outside of this stagnant center—added to the fact that she stands in isolation from society—Hester is able to contemplate and eventually initiate social change. As a point of contrast, Dimmesdale is an integral part of that center, and he cannot seem to release himself from society’s grasp—in fact, he dies trying to do so. He, too, is at the center of society, but because he is not distanced from the group in the way that Hester is, he essentially ossifies from the inside out. Thus, while Hester’s gender empowers her to initiate social reform, it is ultimately another white male—not the magistrates, but Hawthorne—who impedes her progress.

This is a particularly damning view of Hawthorne as an author—and a view that, in light of “*Circles*,” is incomplete. Just as Emerson philosophizes, Hawthorne dramatizes the alternating process of expansion and containment, reform and ossification: the novel begins with Hester’s sentence, then her movement to the periphery, her confinement in the cemetery, and her re-emergence—though it prefaces the novel—in 19th-century Salem. Both Emerson and Hawthorne

depict this process, and they do so by invoking the circle in a way unique to both its history as a literary form and their own historical moment of empire, expansion, polarization, and imprisonment. Not only was the finite, unified circle transforming into a spiral during the 19th century, but this shift coincided with another: the move into a more secular age. Emerson and Hawthorne address issues of this emerging era, such as politics and social change, by invoking a stable circle and then illustrating a spiral-like movement beyond it. Emerson does so in a more abstract, philosophical way, which informs Hawthorne's dramatization of social reform and the relationship between a resistant society and defiant individual. Additionally, "Circles" and *The Scarlet Letter* were published about a decade apart—with Hawthorne writing closer the Civil War—which impacts not just the specific issues each man was addressing, but his general outlook on the prospect of change.

This outlook is the biggest difference between Emerson's and Hawthorne's explorations of social reform. Though they begin by grappling with similar issues and use the circle-spiral to do so, they end in different places: Emerson reassures the reader that change is inevitable, that the heart "tends outward with vast force"; Hawthorne, on the other hand, leaves the reader with the "ridge" that tries "to solidify and hem in the life" (Emerson 214). Whereas Emerson points the reader to the solution, the change, Hawthorne points him or her to the resistance that change incurs. On the one hand, this imbalance shows that Hawthorne is not very invested in depicting a social revolution, but on the other hand, I would argue that he *is* interested in fostering that investment in his readers. Whereas Emerson assures the reader that humanity will ultimately overcome stagnation, Hawthorne asks for proof. He clearly depicts the potential for social

reform, its initiation, and the resistance it will meet; however, he leaves it up to the reader to fill in the gaps.

Because history shows that the world of the novel has evolved into the preface, and the world of the preface has evolved into the reader's present moment, Hester's containment becomes one side of a cyclical, alternating pattern in which change yields resistance, which must then be overcome to effect more change (and yield more resistance). This pattern is evident in both Hawthorne's and Emerson's texts. However, Hawthorne's decision to emphasize resistance instead of progress reveals anxieties—perhaps for him personally, perhaps for the nation—surrounding the prospect of reform. While he demonstrates that individuals are capable of initiating change, and while he demonstrates that change has occurred throughout history, the process connecting the initiation and the fulfillment remains elusive. The only confirmation Hawthorne provides is that progress yields obstacles, resistance, and stagnation—and he does so by fixating on two moments of social stasis: 17th-century Boston and the 19th-century United States. Perhaps sensing his powerlessness not only in the politics of the Custom-House, but in a country hurtling towards the Civil War, he turns to the act of writing. Just as Surveyor Pue preserved Hester's tale, so Hawthorne re-creates it along with his own personal narrative, which is once again revived with every reading. Hester, Hawthorne, and reader become potential agents of change along the same historical continuum, and the anxieties surrounding social progress in 19th-century America, as explored through 17th-century Boston, surface once again in the reader's present day. Hester's movement beyond a restrictive society and her contribution to reform fosters a hope that is meant to coexist with feelings of disappointment, heartbreak, and frustration; the promise of revolution is intentionally not met. Hawthorne ends with the

unfulfilled prospect of change, “an ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow” of social resistance, asking his readers and nation alike whether, in the words of Emerson, their “soul is quick and strong” enough to “burst over that boundary . . . and expand another orbit on the great deep” (214).

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